

Painting as a Medium

Reflections on the Work of Manzur Kargar

Contemporary painting is and has a problem. This problem has to do with painting itself, as well as with the word “contemporary”. The idea of being contemporary is a wavering notion determined by social circumstances. Yesterday’s contemporary ideas stand aloof today. What used to be “out” is now in fashion. Painting is not spared this inconsistency. Still, it manages to create an underlying, durable film on which all forms of fine art currently develop and have developed. Along with sculpture, painting remains the determinative element of art. It has substantially influenced our idea of what art is, and what it can and should be. Painting has therefore become an essential component of civilisation and has helped to form our understanding of the world.

This is also the background of Manzur Kargar’s work. His work is not only painting as a medium, but also medial painting. With painting as a medium, it’s contemporary art which mediates in the process of coming to terms with the reality that lies beyond the painted structures and expressions on the canvass. The hypothetical question, “What would van Gogh have painted if he could have watched television?” and the possible answer illustrate the concept of painting as a medium more clearly. Manzur Kargar’s work goes a step beyond with medial painting – and even further by having it play a double role.

The picturesque quality of his works attracts immediately, yet questions itself at the same time. The portraits of women’s faces create a layer which establishes the painting’s background – although they are much more than that – and are images taken from the media world. As photographs in magazines, these pictures influence our present perception of beauty as painting did in the past. By transposing these photos into the realm of painting, Manzur Kargar compares the significance of ideals in modern media with those of classical painting. As a result, he deconstructs both issues – the emptiness created by media pictures and the fulfilment of painting as a doctrine. The media image refers only to itself, although it pretends to represent something. The doctrine of classical painting, though, was the school which taught us how to represent the world.

With abstract painting modern art crossed paths, so to say, with media imagery. Painting used abstraction to separate itself from representing the world, the best example being the geographic forms shown in concrete painting. This style of measurable lines and shapes creates the foreground of Manzur Kargar’s pictures. The raster structure, in the fashion of concrete painting, makes a clear reference to the technical raster of printed photos. Yet in a paradoxical reversion, the raster also allows the faces behind it to become picturesque portraits. With his transposing, Manzur Kargar challenges the photographic representations to take on a new function: to be depicted - a recourse to the classical subject of portrait painting.

A delicate tension then arises as we continue to perceive the faces as pictures from the media. However, in looking close-up we see that the concrete patterns themselves display a picturesque structure. This contradicts concrete-abstract painting, where there is no trace of the hand to be seen. By laying a pattern over an image, the roles of each are displaced – if not nullified. The pattern becomes a medial image, while the media image turns into a classical portrait. This transformation is what distinguishes the medial painting of Manzur Kargar - art which is well aware of its means.